

Re-Membering the Body

INTRODUCTION

The excitement continues. Advent and Christmas may have come and gone, but Epiphany and the Baptism of the Lord maintain the joy and the promise. The church has an opportunity to be gathered, reoriented, and put back together. At times, holidays can be hectic and draining. We suggest that these two weeks are an opportunity to be re-membered. As a community, we turn to one another and see the light of Christ among us. As individuals, we hear the voice that declares us children of God and feel that acceptance, knowing God is well-pleased with us. This Epiphany, you are invited to be “Re-membering the Body.”

Second Sunday after Christmas Day / Epiphany – *They All Gather Together*

January 5, 2025

[Isaiah 60:1-6](#) [Matthew 2:1-12](#)

Color: White

WORSHIP PLANNING

The color for Epiphany Sunday and Baptism of the Lord is white. White has been the liturgical color since Christmas. So, it might feel like a continuation, which isn't a bad thing. Bask in the glow of Christmas and the promise of incarnation, God with us. The rest of the world has moved on from the holiday observance; maybe in the church, you can cling to it a little longer.

This is more than sentimentalism. This is an opportunity to begin to see the implication of the Christ presence among us. The Christ child, who grew “in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor,” says Luke’s Gospel (Lk. 2:52), becomes the light by which we walk each day and the way we find one another. We gather to the light; as a result, we grow closer to one another.

Epiphany is about celebrating the light that is Jesus the Christ. But it is also a celebration of the community that gathers to see and follow that light. Worship this day needs to be corporate. It needs to move away from “I” language toward “us” language. We need to be reminded that this is a walk we take together. Making disciples is about making relationships, working on relationships, broadening relationships, relying on relationships, and deepening relationships. Give extra time to the passing of the peace or the gathering time. Assign hosts who will work through the gathered congregation and welcome and include and introduce so that everyone feels included and all have access.

This does not deny the importance of the individual and the reality that each can come to the light and be sustained, reset, and commissioned for service and for love. But, as Jesus taught, we find ourselves most profoundly when we lose ourselves in service to another. We find our leadership capability when we put others before us. Worship raises our vision above our individual horizons, so we catch a glimpse of a kin-dom vista before us.

As the magi set aside their personal agendas to follow the star that appeared, and as the nations come to the light that shines forth from the people of God, we are disciples when we follow the Christ who

goes before us. The old saying is true, "If you want to go fast, go alone; but if you want to go far, go together." Let us gather together.

PREACHING NOTES

2025! There's a shocker. It's not shocking that we would make it to 2025. I'm not talking about the apocalypse or anything. It's just that it is time to make the switch. It catches us all by surprise, no matter how closely we look at the calendar. Bankers will tell you they get plenty of misdated checks, for those who still write checks (does anybody still write checks?) in the first week of the new year. Kids will go back to school and write the wrong year at the top of their tests. We have trouble making the shift.

We need to pay attention more, I know that. But it is hard. There are so many things swirling around in our heads and before our eyes that we have trouble focusing. Add to that the frenzy we've gotten ourselves into at the end of the year, and it's no wonder that we aren't paying attention to the little detail of writing the correct year when we write the date.

In fact, our first Sunday of the new year is all about paying attention. Being aware of what is under your nose seems like a "duh" kind of message, and yet it is an appropriate one for the beginning of a new year. Now, for those who have been following along the past couple of weeks, you might wonder at the narrative flow. The end of the previous series, if you were following that, was about going home. It was about settling down and breathing after the hectic holiday season. That's a common mood here at the beginning of a new year. We made it; we're here; let's just relax. Instead, we have an arrival. The wise men show up-- the magi or whatever you want to call them. We just got through one major event, and now here is another one.

The reason for this is simple. Uh. It's Epiphany! Well, actually, it isn't Epiphany this Sunday. Epiphany is on the sixth of January, which is twelve days after Christmas (yeah, that's right, those twelve days of Christmas). Those twelve days were the countdown from Christmas to Epiphany. In the early church, Epiphany was the big celebration. Yes, there was the Mass of Christ's birth - or Christ's Mass, but the big party took place twelve days later on Epiphany. That's when the gifts were exchanged; that's when the families gathered; that's when the big meals were eaten. But we're on the brink this Sunday. So, we can pretend we made it.

Epiphany comes from two Greek words that translate as "the light shows forth" or "the light comes to." In other words, Epiphany is when we figured it out, when we saw the light. In Matthew's story, the Christ event is a quiet affair. There is no multitude of heavenly hosts, no flocks of shepherds crowding into a barn out behind the inn. It's just Mary and Joseph and a bunch of dreams.

At least until chapter two. In chapter two, the doors get blown open. The wise men from the East show up and turn everything upside down.

When word gets out, it gets way out. We don't know where these guys come from, to be honest. Scholars speculate that they may have come from Persia (Iran), Babylon (Iraq), or even further east-Asia, or who knows? Matthew's point is that those paying attention are the foreigners, the strangers. Those who were supposed to know - the ones who heard the prophecy - didn't know and almost missed it. It nearly passed them by. If not for the kindness of strangers, they would never have known.

“We have seen his star,” they said. A star is not something hidden, but something evident. Have you ever tried to show someone a star, though? Right there, you say, and they look everywhere but where you are pointing.

Right there, see that tree?

The little one?

No, the big one over there.

Over where?

Right there, beside the house, next to the streetlight; it’s right above that tree.

What tree?

Never mind.

It is hard to get people to see what we see and hear what we hear. But we keep trying. We want to share what we have seen. People often wonder why the wise men showed up in Jerusalem anyway. Wouldn't it have made more sense to just keep following that star? Well, perhaps it was a political necessity or diplomatic protocol. Or maybe they just wanted everyone to know. “Go, tell it on a mountain.” And there was no mountain higher than Jerusalem. Notice how the Bible always says they went *up* to Jerusalem, no matter what direction they were going? That is partly a theological statement, but it is also geological - Jerusalem was a high spot in the nation of Israel. It was where you would go to make a proclamation you wanted everyone to know. Maybe they didn't know Herod's reputation or maybe they knew better than he did just what he needed.

He needed what we all need, community. Gathering together is the only way we can be put back together when we’ve come apart. The prophet Isaiah draws a picture of light breaking through in a dark time in our Hebrew scripture text for this week. We recognize this scene, having just walked through the Advent and Christmas seasons. And we know that this is what Epiphany means, this light shining in the darkness. But look closer. Look at the response to this light, not just from the people who recognize it, know what it represents, and have been looking for it. But it is the nations who are gathering. What an amazing thing! Not as the result of an evangelism project, but simply being the people of God, walking in the light, together.

That’s the key here, isn’t it? That walking together thing. A handicap to the church's mission in making disciples is its inability to have a single voice on anything. And not only do we have a variety of voices – which isn’t a bad thing – we continually war with our siblings when they disagree with us. What might bring us together? What focus might enable us to be the light to the nations that draw the searchers and the seekers to gather with us?

Some years ago, due to the generosity of members of the church I was serving, my whole family got to attend the Boars Head and Yule Log Festival at Plymouth Congregational Church in Fort Wayne, Indiana. I had heard about it for years but never attended. We thoroughly enjoyed the program. There were two parts to the event; one was an old English setting of the Christmas feast; the other was a Nativity pageant. At the end, they blended into one whole. It was simply beautiful.

At one point during the presentation of the Christ Child and the various visitors had made their way to the manger and the angels had danced, I found myself with tears in my eyes. This time, I was not in charge of the service, so I was free to acknowledge that my heart longed to worship the child. We are created with this need to worship, or to pay homage, as the wise men say in our passage. That is what

brought the wise men so far, however far it was. That was why they went to Herod and anyone who might help them find their way. They longed to worship, as do we all.

That is one of the things we forget to pay attention to, our need to worship. It's not just a need, but a longing, a deep longing that nothing else will fill. We are incomplete without it; we are missing something of significance. Epiphany is an opportunity to fill that void, to make us whole.

Venite Adoremus – come and worship. That is the invitation of the wise men. That is the prophecy from Isaiah. That is the meaning of Epiphany. That is the gift of God. Come and worship. Come and meet your heart's desire. Come and be made whole. Come together and be re-membered.

LITURGICAL RESOURCES

Call to Worship

Children of God, we enter the new year as we ended the last: gathered together for worship!

We gather to seek, find, and follow the Light.

The prophet Isaiah calls to us from deep in the past: "Arise, shine; for your light has come."

We gather to seek, find, and follow the Light.

The magi followed a star to find a small child who is the Light of the world.

We gather to seek, find, and follow the Light.

So, let us receive the call of Isaiah and follow the example of the magi as we begin this new year turning our faces to God whose glory shows up among us as a vulnerable child, a poor carpenter, and a foot-washing servant who is the salvation of the world.

We gather to seek, find, and follow the Light today and every day. Amen.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, July 2024.

Opening Prayer

Dear God, reveal to us this day what our eyes look for but cannot see; what our ears hear and cannot understand. Shine your light on the pages of our lives. In the places where we share the dark, everyone looks bright, and everything looks right. We are not anxious to move out of our darkness where we are fooled. In the darkness, our motives are not clear, our ideas are not voiced, and our relationships are not questioned. But when your light shines, everything is like an open window. We see clearly. Help us to move on with you, Light of lights. We praise you and pray in the name of Jesus Christ the Lord. Amen.

Written by T. Anne Daniel, *The Africana Worship Book, Year B* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2007), 129.

Prayer of Confession

Gracious God,

we would like to be among those who saw the coming of the Christ Child,
those who dropped all that they were doing
and traveled to worship the coming of God's love into this world.

We would like to be those who cared for God in infant vulnerability;
who tickled and cuddled and comforted the growing child,
that he might know love and safety.

And yet, merciful God,

we must recognize all the times we are more like Herod.

Whenever we, in our actions or in our inactions,
find our own need for control more compelling
than the needs of others for health and safety.

Whenever we cling to the security of our privilege,
rather than standing up for the rights of the oppressed.

Whenever we are complicit in the harming of innocents
for the sake of profit, or power,
or because we fear to know, and to change,
the injustices of this world.

Loving God,

**we confess our sins against you and one another,
and pray that you will fill us with your light,
that we may live our lives as true disciples in your name,
without counting the cost.**

In the name of Christ,

the one who showed us the way, we pray. Amen.

Assurance of Pardon

God's light is present in this world.

Present in the Christ child, born to lead us out of darkness.

Present in the star, in all that guides us to love.

God's light is in the world, and the darkness did not overcome it.

God's grace is in the world, and our missteps will not overcome it.

We are loved, we are forgiven. Alleluia! Amen.

Written by Eliza Buchakjian-Tweedy, Pastor at First Church Congregational, Rochester, NH, on <http://sermonizing.wordpress.com/>. Re-posted on the re:Worship blog at <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2013/12/prayer-of-confession-matthew-2-1-18.html>.

Benediction

Beloved, go from this place carrying the blessing of the Light who has come among so that the love of the Christ child may shine within you, casting rays of good news wherever you go. Amen.

Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, July 2024.

First Sunday after the Epiphany - Baptism of the Lord – *I Will Be with You*

January 12, 2025

[Isaiah 43:1-7](#) [Psalm 29](#) [Acts 8:14-17](#) [Luke 3:15-17, 21-22](#)

Color - White

WORSHIP PLANNING

So, if last week was about community, this week ought to be about the individual. Right? Well, no, not really. Again, yes, there is an individual component whenever we talk about baptism. A choice has been made, sometimes by an individual or a sponsor, that the ritual is desired. Just like those who waded into the river when John the Baptist was holding forth, a decision was made. An acceptance of the offer. Individuals matter; that has always been true and will always be true. But praise be to God, no individual is left to struggle on their own. No one needs to endure, to grow, to be transformed on their own.

Baptism is a partnership. At its core, there is the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the person being baptized. Baptism is a promise, a promise of presence. Today would be a great opportunity to remember the baptism of those who gather week by week. If there are those to be baptized, saving it for this week would be a powerful reminder. And if there are not candidates for baptism, then we can remember together. We have a ritual to let everyone hear the promises made and the blessings conferred, "A Service of Reaffirmation," <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/new-service-of-reaffirmation-of-the-baptismal-covenant> (a reaffirmation of the covenant, we call it). It's a way of saying again what we said or was said in our name at our baptism.

What becomes clear as we hear these words is that this isn't an individual act. It is a corporate ritual, a communal covenant, a mutual promise to God and to one another. We celebrate here the community being made, the support being offered, the lives bound together in discipleship. On this day, we look to Christ, but then we see Christ at work in us. The power and the presence of the Christ in his baptism is given fresh testimony in every baptism we remember today. Let there be water where the gathered can remember with all their senses what it means to be immersed in God's presence and surrounded by the love and care of the congregation. Today is a grand celebration of the community of faith. It is a day of worship of the one who went into the water for us, with us, and promised to be present among us always.

PREACHING NOTES

Who's in charge here? That's the default query when things are falling apart. When nothing makes sense, we are inclined to ask who got us here, teetering on this brink, up this creek, wandering in this wilderness. Who's in charge here?

That's not a random question. It provides the backdrop to our text for this week. It isn't the main point (I don't think so, anyway), but it is the undercurrent, the subtext to this story. It is the background noise that sometimes makes it hard to hear the symphony of grace and love that issues forth from this watery yet fiery moment down by the riverside.

The baptism of Jesus is the second of three moments of epiphany that we celebrate in season. The season of Epiphany begins with a dubious pack of foreigners struck by a star and ends with a collection of Jesus' "best and the brightest" stunned by a transfiguration and a voice in a cloud. In all three, there is this sense that we are merely spectators, watching something just beyond our understanding. We feel our hearts pound with hope and with joy, but if asked, we can't say what struck us so. But just watching from a distance fills an emptiness we didn't know was there, and it answers a question we didn't know we were asking.

Watch again as he comes down to the water. What is interesting about Luke's depiction of the event is that the baptism hardly figures in at all. The verses we skip serve to usher John the Baptist off the stage in favor of Jesus, who now begins his ministry. But after John's bluster, the next thing we know is that the baptism had already taken place. We missed it. Ain't that always the way? We come for the show, and by the time we get to our seats, it has already happened. "Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus had also been baptized..." Darn it!

You'd think that if Luke had a clue about the centuries of struggle the church has had about the details of baptism, he might have spent a little more time with it. We don't know if Jesus was immersed or sprinkled. We don't know which liturgy John preferred or if the vows that Jesus made were the same as the ones we make. We don't know if John was properly credentialed or if Jesus followed the rules. We don't know who signed the certificate. We need to know these things, don't we?

Luke doesn't seem to think so. "Jesus had also been baptized..." That's the sum total of the description here. If Luke is saying that the methodology isn't what is important, then what is? If the methodology of baptism isn't what we are supposed to be asking about here, then what is the question? The fact that all

four gospels spend some time wrestling with the relative position of Jesus and John is a hint that at least one important question is, “Who’s in charge here?”

The people gathered on the riverbank and wondered. They hoped; they leaned into the moment, into the phenomenon that was John the B. They watched him wade in the shallow waters and call for change, for real change. “Quit playing games,” he said, “quit fooling yourselves. Get down to the hard work of living right. There is more to this life than status, power, and riches. Get right or get left out!”

Maybe it was his confidence as much as his content, but they began to wonder. Maybe he is the one. Luke says that in their hearts (not in their heads), they were questioning. This wasn’t an intellectual pondering of possibilities. No, this was a heart thing. They were leaning in, wondering, hoping. They had begun to recognize that they were indeed sheep without a shepherd, and they were seeing some possibilities in the one who churned up the waters of the Jordan River. Is this the one? Is this the one we’ve been waiting for, the one we’ve been praying for?

Maybe they began to murmur to one another; maybe someone shouted it out loud; or maybe he just saw the hunger in their eyes, but somehow John heard the question and jumped in to answer. “Not me,” he declared, as forcefully as he had called for repentance. “No, someone bigger, someone stronger, someone with a shovel who will toss you up into the wind to rip away the empty husks of your sinfulness, someone who will see down into the depths of your soul. No, it’s not me,” said John. “But watch out, the one is on his way.”

Or already in line. That’s Luke’s subtle point. There is no grand entrance, no miraculous appearance. No, not him, not Jesus. When the people have been baptized, and when Jesus had been baptized too. Too? Jesus shouldn’t be a “too,” an also-ran, a member of the crowd. It is Jesus, for heaven’s sake! Why is Jesus even there in the first place? That’s the question that has puzzled biblical scholars since the beginnings of the church. John was preaching a baptism of repentance. But we know that Jesus was without sin. So, why would he need to be there? What’s going on here?

“Are you the one?”

“Yes, but not the one you want.”

Instead, he decides to be the one you need. The one who stands in line with all the other broken ones; the one who takes his place among the bruised and the hurting; the one who wades into the mess of the world and buries himself in it; the one who climbs up out of the anxiety of living in this world and falls to his knees. That’s the one John was ranting and raving about. It isn’t a shovel Jesus carries; it is a cross, and by that implement, we are all cast into the winds of the Spirit to be transformed. But instead of condemnation, we hear those words that he heard, “You are my Beloved. With you I am well-pleased.”

Who’s in charge here? We live our lives asking that question. Most of the time, we think we are in charge-- in charge of our own lives, our own wills. Yet, in our saner moments, we know we need help. We know we need someone to follow. We need an example, a guide, a hope. We need a savior.

Who’s in charge here? That’s an epiphany question, a baptism question. It’s your question and mine. Who’s in charge here?

“Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone” (Deuteronomy 6:4).

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind... And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:37-39).

Who’s in charge here? The writer of the Twenty-Ninth Psalm knows who is in charge. There are glorious descriptions of the God we worship in this psalm. Confident, sure, awestruck. Yet, the psalm ends with a prayer. May you bless us. May you empower us, which means, it seems, be with us. Don’t rule from afar. Be with us, a part of us, among us. Gather with us when we gather. Bring all this glory and set our feet on the right paths. Guide and guard us.

Peter and John in the reading from Acts know that, without this presence, without the one who walks alongside, the journey will be too much for us. Baptism had happened; choices were made, and allegiance was given, and yet a presence was needed. So, they came to be and to bring that presence. They gathered with the baptized and said, “Hold on to this. That same presence that came to Jesus and looked like a dove descending and a voice proclaiming is offered now to you. You may not see a bird; you may not hear a voice or even a rumble but hear my voice and know that you are not alone any longer. And you are loved. Hold on to that. Hold on together, and you’ll be on your way.”

The way won’t be easy, Isaiah tells us that. There will be water and there will be fire. Isaiah doesn’t hint. It’s not really a part of a prophet’s repertoire. But, and here’s the good news in that bad news situation, you won’t be alone. When (not if, but when) you go through the water, I’ll be with you. When (not if, but when) you go through the fire, I’ll be there. It’ll be hot, wet and painful, and you’ll think you’ll be burnt to a crisp or swept out to sea, but I’ll be with you.

That’s the promise. Baptism doesn’t mean safety or security. Just ask Jesus. It means presence. It means community. That’s our gift; that’s the joy--for us and then through us to the world. That’s what we have to offer. There are no secret answers, no quick fixes, no easy steps to a better life; there is presence. “Best of all,” John Wesley supposedly said on his deathbed, God is with us.” Amen.

LITURGICAL RESOURCES

Call to Worship

When we pass through the cleansing waters of baptism and the troubled waters of our lives, God declares:

I will be with you.

When we go through the fires that refine us and the fires that threaten our livelihoods, God declares:

I will be with you.

Even when we travel to the far corners of the earth or down into the depths of our souls, God declares:

I will be with you.

So come, let us worship God whose love never fails, whose presence never leaves, whose mercies never end.

Praise be to God who, in the form of Jesus, waded into the waters of baptism to prove God's solidarity with us! Amen.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, July 2024.

Opening Prayer

Eternal Father,
at the baptism of Jesus
you revealed him to be your Son
and anointed him with the Holy Spirit,
Keep all who are born of water and the Spirit
faithful to their calling as your people;
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
who lives and reigns
with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.

Posted on the Church of Scotland's **Starters for Sunday** website. Re-posted on the re:Worship blog at <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2014/01/collect-baptism-of-our-lord.html>.

Prayer of Confession

Creator of the universe,
we gather amazed at your power and glory.
We are eager to worship you and offer our praise,
but we are often reluctant to answer
when we hear you calling our name.
We sing our songs of tribute in the sanctuary,
but shy away from the river,
lest we be baptized
with the fire of the Holy Spirit.
Forgive us when we forget your promise
to be with us always, O God.
Renew us with the power of your ever-present love,
and strengthen us to proclaim your justice
throughout the world. Amen.

Words of Assurance

(Isaiah 43:1)

Hear the words of our creator,
spoken through the prophet Isaiah:
“I have called you by name.
You are mine. Do not fear,
for I have redeemed you.”

Adapted from Laura Jaquith Bartlett on the **Ministry Matters** website,
<http://www.ministrymatters.com/>. Re-posted on the re:Worship blog at <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2013/01/confession-epiphany-1-c.html>.

Benediction

May the Triune God, whose presence surrounds you always and everywhere, bless you with the deep assurance that you are never alone. In the waters, in the fires, in the far corners of the world, God is with us. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, July 2024.